

Community Engagement Strategy 2021-24



RESTORE & THRIVE

ARMIDALE
Regional Council



Consultation for the
Armidale Creeklands
Masterplan in 2017



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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

The Armidale Regional Community pays tribute to their love of land, love of people, and love of culture.



Message from the General Manager

Local Government operates at a level of government that is most connected to the people and places in which we live, work and visit. Council places community engagement at the centre of everything we do. Through the suite of Community Engagement documents developed and our range of social inclusion strategies we are determined to include the community's meaningful input into decisions that affect them.

At Armidale Regional Council we value and share in the community's passion for the Armidale region and are committed to working together to make better decisions for a prosperous and sustainable future for everyone that calls our region home.

The Armidale Regional Council Community Engagement Strategy 2021-24 aims to help our residents and Council's other stakeholders to understand how and when Council will engage with them on issues that affect their future.

The strategy draws on the Council and the Executive Leadership Team's collective desire to deliver better community engagement by implementing best practice community engagement techniques and cementing it as one of Council's top priorities. In doing so, effort will be centered on helping the community understand and embrace the work required in achieving community outcomes and rebuilding confidence and trust in our organisation.

We will draw on the community's experience and imagination to contribute a common sense approach to Council's work.

James Roncon
General Manager



Farmers' Market pop-up consultation



UNE O Week water conservation stand



Budget session in Ben Lomond



3. Encouraging collaboration and conversation

What is community engagement?

Community engagement is the process where the Council works together with the community to achieve common goals through genuine relationships built on trust, goodwill and respect.

While it does not replace the final decision making power of the elected members of the Council, community engagement is considered invaluable in its ability to inform the Armidale Regional Council decision-making process, ensuring that the final decisions made by the Council are equitable, sustainable and well-informed.

Some further definition of terms that are used in community engagement practice are:

- **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION** is a term often used for community engagement, both are interchangeable.
- **COMMUNICATIONS** is the process of informing the wider public about projects and community engagement activities. It is often a one-way exchange through various media channels.
- **COMMUNITY** is a set of individuals who have been grouped together by geography, demographics or interest.
- **STAKEHOLDER** is an organisation or a group that has a special interest in a project and has direct input into the decision-making that affects them. Community becomes stakeholders when a project directly affects them.
- **CAPACITY BUILDING** is the process of strengthening and empowering a community to implement and sustain their own solutions to problems, making them more resilient.
- **ACTIVATION** is an activity or an event that engages people with their environment and community through positive and creative cultural and social experiences.

'Community engagement is a planned process with the specific purpose of working across organisations, stakeholders and communities to shape our decisions or actions in relation to a problem, opportunity or outcome.'

Source: International Association of Public Participation

Community Engagement Policy

Community engagement will be a driving force for Council's operations including corporate, strategic land use, financial planning and Council's day to day business activities. Council's approach to all community and stakeholder engagement activities is guided by the following set of principles:

- 1) **Right to be involved:** We believe our stakeholders have a right to be involved in decisions that affect them and we are genuine, responsive and transparent in seeking valuable input from the community and considering that input when decisions are made.
- 2) **Accessible and inclusive:** We are inclusive and accessible to all stakeholder groups, incorporating all ages, abilities, genders and cultural backgrounds. We provide a range of engagement activities to ensure that the broadest possible range of stakeholders have the opportunity to participate.
- 3) **Timely:** We respect people's time and provide sufficient timeframes for stakeholders to participate and provide input.
- 4) **Tailored:** We use a range of engagement and communication methods that suit the purpose of engagement and the range of stakeholders involved, including subsets of the community that may be difficult to reach.
- 5) **Transparent:** We make our decisions in an open and transparent way and provide feedback to our stakeholders to explain our decisions and how their input has influenced the outcome.
- 6) **Learning from practice:** We evaluate our engagement activities and are committed to continuous improvement.

Statutory requirements for a Community Engagement Strategy

Currently, councils in NSW are required to have a Community Engagement Strategy, based on social justice principles, identifying relevant stakeholder groups in the community, outline the methods that the council will use to engage each of these groups and allow sufficient time to effectively undertake the engagement when developing their Community Strategic Plan (CSP). This is part of the NSW Government 'Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework'.

The CSP is for a minimum of 10 years and sets out the community's needs, aspirations and priorities across the 'triple bottom line' of economic, social and environmentally sustainable development. Linked to the CSP is a Resourcing Strategy comprising long-term financial, asset management and workforce plans.

The CSP must be reviewed every four years by each incoming council. Incoming councils must also adopt a 4-year Delivery Program to implement the CSP. Annual Operational Plans (budgets) flow from the Delivery Program.

Even though it is a statutory requirement for a Community Engagement Strategy to be created when developing a council's CSP, this strategy seeks to broaden that scope to cover all of council's projects and initiatives.

Statutory roles and responsibilities

This Strategy reflects the various requirements for community consultation and engagement set out in the Local Government Act. The Act defines the following roles and responsibilities:

Councillors represent the collective interests of residents, ratepayers and the local community; and facilitate communication with the community. Role of the governing body is outlined in **Section 223(1) of the Local Government Act**

The Council as a whole consults regularly with community organisations and other key stakeholders, and keeps them informed of its decisions

The Mayor, as leader of the Council and as a community leader, promotes partnerships with key stakeholders; and together with the General Manager, ensures adequate opportunities and mechanisms for engagement between the Council and the local community

The General Manager advises the Mayor and Council on appropriate forms of community engagement in different situations, and prepares a Community Engagement Strategy.



Water Week Expo during the drought

Social Justice Principles

Equity - There should be fairness in decision making, prioritising and allocation of resources, particularly for those in need. Everyone should have a fair opportunity to participate in the future of the community. The planning process should take particular care to involve and protect the interests of people in vulnerable circumstances.

Access - All people should have fair access to services, resources and opportunities to improve their quality of life.

Participation - Everyone should have the maximum opportunity to genuinely participate in decisions which effect their lives.

Rights - Equal rights should be established and promoted, with opportunities provided for people from diverse linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds to participate in community life.

Stakeholders:
any individual, group of individuals, organisation or politics entity with an interest or stake in the outcome of a decision.

Why do we engage?

Community engagement is built on openness, transparency, trust & respect.

Council recognises the right of the community to be informed and have input in decisions.

Council values effective engagement in developing a positive relationship with its community. A positive relationship will lead to better decision making.

Council seeks to listen to the views, aspirations, issues and needs of the community and balance these with other influences, such as budgetary and legislative constraints to make informed decisions.

Who we engage?

The community that lives in the Armidale Regional Council Local Government Area has a diverse population and our community, including all those who live, study, work and visit have a unique role to play in its life and development. Our community includes individuals such as rate payers, residents, students, workers and business owners, as well as stakeholders such as community interest groups, not-for-profit organisations and other levels of government.

When engaging with our community, Council will ensure that opportunities exist for everyone to have a say on decisions that may affect them, regardless of age, gender, sexual identity, ethnicity, education, ability and other diverse aspects of personal and community identity.

We understand that some members of our community may find it challenging to participate using standard engagement methods and techniques. Council will continuously explore new ways to talk to our community and offer a variety of opportunities to cater for and include those individuals and groups.



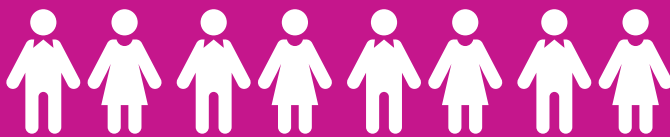
4. Our community

The Armidale Regional Council area is located in the New England region of New South Wales, about 500 kms north of Sydney CBD and 500 kms south of the Brisbane CBD.

The Armidale region is home to over 29,704 residents and attracts thousands of visitors each year. The Armidale region is made up of everyone who lives, works, studies and visits the area.

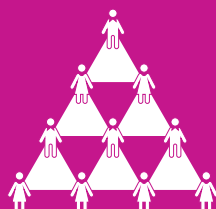
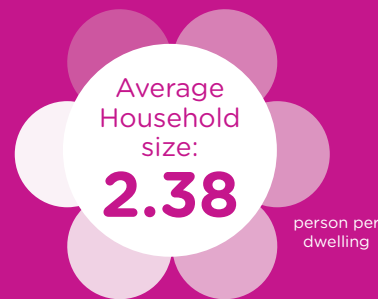
The following statistics are sourced from Profile ID - Armidale Regional Council Community Profile and is based on results from the 2016 Census of Population and Housing.

Population:
29,704

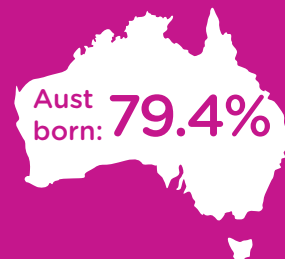


Males: **48.3%**
Females: **51.7%**

Babies and pre-schoolers (0 to 4) 5.7%	Primary schoolers (5 to 11) 8.3%	Secondary schoolers (12 to 17) 8.5%	Tertiary education/independence (18 to 24) 13.8%	Young workforce (25 to 34) 11.8%
Parents and homebuilders (35 to 49) - 16.4%	Older workers & pre-retirees (50 to 59) - 13.1%	Empty nesters and retirees (60 to 69) - 10.7%	Seniors (70 to 84) 9.6%	Frail aged (85 and over) 2.2%



Indigenous population: **7.4%**
Overseas born: **12.3%**
Needs assistance due to age or disability: **5.2%**



Employment:

Participation rate in the workforce -

55.3%

Unemployed

7.7%

Unpaid work (volunteer) -

27%



Top 4 industries:

Education & Training	20.9%
Health Care and Social Assistance	16.4%
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	10.9%
Retail Trade	10.6%

Education

Higher Education: **23.2%**

Vocational qualifications: **17.9%**

Speaks English

84.7%



Non-English speaking

7.9%

Top 4 languages other than English

Mandarin	1.1%
Arabic	1.0%
Nepali	0.5%
Filipino/Tagalong	0.4%

5. Our strategic aspirations and priorities

Strategic aspirations

Our main strategic aspiration is that our community understands and embraces the work required to achieve community outcomes and we build confidence and trust in our organisation.

The primary outcomes of the Community Engagement Strategy 2021-2024 are outlined in the Armidale Regional Council Delivery Program 2018-2022. Further, these are again linked to the goals and Community Outcomes established in the Community Strategic Plan 2017-2027.

They include:

- a. L1. The community is engaged and has access to local representation.
- b. L1.1 Develop and deliver an engagement strategy to ensure effective engagement with the community and provide opportunities for participation in decision making where appropriate
- c. L1.2 Promote a wide variety of engagement methods, with a mixture of traditional and online mediums, to ensure the whole community can easily share their opinion and participate in community engagement activities
- d. L1.3 Support elected representatives to engage with their community and provide a process to share feedback they receive.



ARDi the autonomous vehicle on display at UNE O Week

Strategic Priorities

A new “Turnaround Strategy” driven by the General Manager in collaboration with all staff and Councillors is a key focus for Council as the organisation sets a path to be restored and to thrive.

This strategy and roadmap combined with a “back to basics” approach identifies key strategic priorities relevant to our engagement with the community.

Our priorities are to:

- Connect with the community to humanise our teams
- Improve the awareness of what we do in the community
- Get our people and the community inside the change journey and provide opportunities for community led solutions in partnership with Council

Strategic Directions

During the course of implementing this strategy Council will:

Continue building trust. It is vital that Council continues to build community trust in its engagement process. There is a perception in the community that Council either don't listen or have previously proceeded with projects and initiatives without adequate community consultation. It

is important for staff to remember that it will take time to rebuild Council's reputation in the community. A significant part of this journey is achieved by continually improving the Council engagement methods and overall transparency where possible.

Early engagement.

Community engagement should be essential for the development of any significant project or initiative. Scoping and preliminary planning of projects must be included in the foundations of project management. The views and needs of stakeholders should be considered at the earliest stages to ensure a clear direction and that outcomes are met for all parties where practicable.

Council will pursue its aim of ensuring engagement is undertaken at the inception of projects and initiatives by providing a Community Engagement Framework & Toolkit to provide guidance in the event that Communication staff are unavailable at the outset of a project.

Inclusive engagement. It is important that all future engagement activities include a focus on targeting traditionally “hard to reach” members of our community. In the Armidale region these groups are typically children and youth, aged and disabled residents, indigenous residents, and other minority populations such as the culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD).



Creeklands walk with community on the masterplan

It is essential that engagement methods or activities include targeted processes to ensure these groups can have input into any outcomes or decisions.

To achieve this goal, Council will look to:

- **Work with local aged and disability service providers when engaging**
- **Work with local schools, pre-schools and community youth bodies when engaging**
- **Work with indigenous health, service providers and community groups**
- **Undertake staff training to ensure Council is comfortable and skilled in dealing with people with a disability**
- **Upgrade Council's website to meet WCAG 2.0 AA standard, including language translation for minority groups**

Areas of focus

Council has identified a number of key engagement focus areas and approaches to boost the quality of Council's efforts to genuinely engage with the Armidale region and other stakeholders over the next three years.

These include:

- Increase digital capability by:
 - Further development of the **Your Say Armidale** online community engagement hub
 - Improving **online self service** capability including forms and information accessibility
 - **Shared communication:** Council can provide improved quality of communication by allowing subject matter experts to communicate directly with their target audience via social media channels. A focus on training, platform purchase for moderating and distribution as well as the development of guidelines, can increase its communication flexibility, and in some instances improve the depth and accuracy of information being passed on to the public
- An **engagement toolkit** will be prepared and published on Your Say Armidale to provide more detail on the use of different engagement techniques
- An **Engagement Improvement Panel** will be established to monitor and advise the Council, Mayor and General Manager on implementation
- **Review of communications and engagement resources** to achieve the outcomes of this strategy
- **Upskilling more of our staff in Community Engagement best practice** by undertaking training in the methodology and frameworks provided by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)



6. Our framework

This strategy is committed to delivering community engagement activities in line with the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum and the NSW Government’s Social Justice Principles.

How does Council engage?

Levels of Participation

The Public Participation Spectrum developed by IPA2 identifies five different stages of consultation relative to the level of impact the community should have on decision making. The stages are:

1. Inform
2. Consult
3. Involve
4. Collaborate
5. Empower

*Council functions under the Local Government Act NSW 1993; and accordingly only the elected body of Council is ‘empowered’ to make decisions and implement actions.

Engagement activities conducted at the Empower level will be limited to Council.

For Armidale Regional Council the key stages can be categorised as:

1. Inform
2. Consult
3. Involve
4. Collaborate

IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Public Participation Goal	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decision.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public issues and concerns are consistently understood and considered.	To work directly with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.
Promise to the Public	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and issues are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advise and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.
Example Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fact sheets • Websites • Open houses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public comment • Focus groups • Surveys • Public meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshops • Deliberate polling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizen Advisory committees • Consensus-building • Participatory decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizen juries • Ballots • Delegated decisions

Inform

Commitment to the Community - We will keep you informed.

Council's Role - Give stakeholders balanced, accurate and relevant information on decisions, policies, plans and strategies.

Community's Role - Listen.

The inform stage is for day-to-day use, often when Council has already made a decision, to communicate the outcome or status of projects, or when there is only one way that Council believes it can progress a project.

Customer Service Centre: Council's administration offices in Armidale and Guyra provide a 'one-stop-shop' for Council services using customer service, visual displays, and printed materials for Council related business.

Armidale Regional Council websites: One of Council's primary communication tools, the website should be a comprehensive source of information for all Council services and programs.

Advertising & Features: Council will consider the use of advertising/features with any local media servicing the area e.g. local newspapers; radio and television networks.

Media Releases: Regular media releases ensure Council provides reliable, timely and accurate information to all media servicing the Armidale Regional Local Government Area, including print and broadcast.

Publications/information material: Armidale Regional Council publications about Council specific programs, services and initiatives are a valuable source of information.

Social media: Council utilise social media platforms to deliver Council related news or to share community initiatives. These include: Facebook, Twitter, Youtube; Instagram and LinkedIn.

Council facilitated community events: Council-hosted events which provide opportunities for councillors and staff to provide information to the community. Council also strongly supports and participates in other community events.

Council News: The printed newsletter is distributed quarterly in the rates notices delivered to ratepayers.

Council E-News: Distributed fortnightly via email to a distribution list.

Targeted Direct Mail: Addressed letters sent directly to the customer. This is usually specific to a project, geographic location or members of a particular group or demographic.

Presentation/Public Speaking: Councillors and staff speak at relevant meetings or events such as community events.

Community Notice Boards: At Council facilities, libraries, and areas relevant to the audience.

Site Specific Signage: Erected temporarily or permanently to inform the public of the project and relevant project details.



Local Government
Week tours

Consult

Commitment to the Community - We will listen to you, consider your ideas and concerns and keep you informed.

Council's Role - Facilitate two-way communication between Council and the community. At this level, Council seeks feedback to identify important community issues and perspectives that can influence and assist decision making. Informing is a prerequisite for consultation.

Community's Role - Contribute

Community Forums: These provide an opportunity for members of the community to attend a structured two-way information session hosted by Council, usually about specific projects and topics.

Public exhibitions and submissions: Required by legislation for certain types of issues, items on exhibition and development applications are open to submissions from the public. The information is made available for the public to comment on within a certain time frame, while informing citizens how they can make their submissions/comments to Council.

Online engagement hub: Council utilises an online engagement platform to coordinate a central point for consultations and public exhibitions of initiatives, policies and projects. www.yoursay.armidale.nsw.gov.au

Community displays/stalls: Councillors and Council officers are available at a nominated venue and for a specific period of time, encouraging citizens to attend and discuss the topic/s.

Surveys: Target audience surveys should be integrated with broader consultation for larger projects, using independent market research companies or survey specialists where possible.

Site Meeting/Tour: Interaction at specific locations, usually facilitated by Council for invited participants.

Briefings: Inform relevant community groups that they may request a briefing with a Councillor/s or Council staff to discuss a particular issue.



Community Strategic Plan consultation 2021

Involve/Collaborate

Promise to the community - We will work with you on an ongoing basis to ensure your ideas, concerns and aspirations are considered. We will provide feedback on Council's decisions.

Council's Role - Create a collaborative relationship/partnership between Council and the community, facilitating involvement in shaping decisions that affect community life. Informing and consulting are components of involving/collaborating.

Community's Role - Participate

Meetings by invitation: Community leaders, stakeholders and representatives meet with councillors and Council staff for discussion, debate and exchange of views on a specific issue.

Consultation with specific purpose committees: Formal consultation between councillors and Council staff with members of Council Committees, Local Area Committees or other groups with expertise in particular areas. Engagement will be governed by the groups' terms of reference.

Large Group/Stakeholder Collaboration: As forums to address a strategic issue or plan, these collaborations bring together councillors, Council staff, stakeholder groups and individuals with relevant expertise and knowledge to formulate a response.

Empower

Commitment to the community - We will give the community the opportunity to participate in a transparent flow of information and feedback to Councillors, who have been empowered as the community representatives to make decisions in accordance with the Local Government Act 1993.

Council's Role -Decide

Community's Role - Vote for Councillors that you believe will make decisions in the best interests of the broad community.



Consultation on the roll-out of City to Soil in Guyra



Social Justice Principles in practice

The NSW Government's Social Justice Directions Statement identifies four key principles underpinning social justice.

These principles guide the planning and development of Council's engagement activities.

Equity

- There should be fairness in the distribution of resources, particularly for those in need.
- The planning processes should take particular care to involve and protect the interests of people in vulnerable circumstances. The equity implications of proposed activities include the impact on community well-being, as well as who pays and who benefits.

Access

- All people should have fair access to economic resources, services and rights essential to improving their quality of life.
- All residents should be able to get to and use public facilities and services, regardless of their social and economic circumstances.

Participation

All people should have the maximum opportunity to genuinely participate in decisions that affect their lives. This involves a two-way flow of views and information, generally with a focus on decision making.

Rights

- Equality of rights should be established and promoted.
- Opportunities should be provided for positive participation to accommodate linguistic, cultural and religious diversity within the local government area.

When do we engage?

Consultation methods vary according to the type of project/issue. This strategy sets guidelines for engagement on matters which are classified into one of four categories:

1. Region-wide / High Impact: Strategic plans, major projects and resource issues. For example, Community Strategic Plan, Local Environment Plans, region-wide Development Control Plans.

2. Region -wide / Low Impact: Operational plans and policy development, minor projects and major projects with limited impact. For example major festivals and events.

3. Locality Based / High Impact: Locality improvement and site specific matters and events. For example, development applications in accordance with statutory requirements, construction of Council facilities, and works in central business districts.

4. Locality Based / Low Impact: Council service / program planning and delivery. For example, local road works, operational services such as traffic management and general maintenance of public areas or upgrade of parks and recreational areas (minor works level).



Engagement Matrix

The below engagement matrix shows the minimum engagement methods required against four impact categories. These categories are ranked from high to low, depending on if they effect the broader region or a specific local area.

WHAT TO DO?	WHEN YOU'RE DEALING WITH			
1 - EVERY TIME	Region wide/ High impact	Region wide/ Low impact	Locality based/ High impact	Locality based/ Low impact
2 - IN MOST CIRCUMSTANCES				
3 - ON SPECIFIC OCCASIONS				
4 - ON RARE OCCASIONS				
Customer Service Centre	1	1	1	1
Armidale Regional website/s	1	1	1	3
Advertising/features	1	1	2	3
Media Release	1	1	2	3
Social Media	1	1	1	2
Publications/informal material	1	2	2	4
Council facilitated events	4	4	4	4
Targeted direct mail	2	2	2	3
Council News - rates notice	2	2	2	2
Council - E-News	2	2	2	2
Presentation/public speaking	2	3	3	4
Community notice boards	3	3	3	3
Site specific signage	3	3	3	3
Community Form	3	3	2	2
Online engagement hub	2	2	2	2
Public Exhibition submissions	1	1	3	4
Community displays/Listening Posts	2	2	3	4
Surveys	3	4	4	4
Site meeting/Tour	2	3	2	4
Briefing	1	2	2	2
Meeting by invitation	1	2	3	4
Council Committees/Advisory Groups	1	2	3	4
Large Group stakeholder collaboration	1	2	3	4



Legislative requirements

This strategy relates to many activities undertaken by Council. However, legislative requirements and other council policies regulate the procedures and outcomes of some Council activities, limiting the opportunities for public input and the scope for community engagement.

Community Participation Plan

Council recognises community participation throughout the planning system is not only your right, it also delivers better planning results for the people of the Armidale Region.

Ultimately, Council has a responsibility, along with the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, to deliver the objectives of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979 (EP & A Act) including the promotion of orderly and economic use of land, facilitating ecologically sustainable development and promoting social and economic wellbeing.

Community participation is an overarching term covering how Council will engage with the community in our work under the EP & A Act, including legislative reform, plan making and decisions on proposed development. The level and extent of community participation will vary depending on the community, the scope of the proposal under consideration and the potential impact of the decision.

The community includes anyone who is affected by the planning system and includes individuals, community groups, Aboriginal communities, peak bodies representing a range of interests, businesses, local government and State and Commonwealth government agencies.

The Community Participation Plan sits alongside the Council's engagement strategy and is referenced accordingly on planning matters governed by legislation.



7. Evaluation and feedback

Following the implementation of a community engagement project, Council will evaluate the effectiveness of the program in reaching the desired audience and achieving the required outcome.

When the outcome of a community engagement activity is required to be presented to Council for a recommendation a report will include a summary of the engagement process, outcomes and analysis of feedback gathered. If submissions were invited a detailed report of the submissions received will be included for review.

Council will then provide feedback for the people who participated in the program, in order to increase their understanding of how the input gathered during the program was considered/utilised in the decision making process, and what direction was ultimately taken.

By providing open and timely feedback to participants, Council will enhance the transparency of its decision making and further strengthen its relationship with the broad community. Feedback will also improve future engagement programs through a greater understanding of the engagement process.